#### Sustain *Limited Edition* October 30/31, 2010

Let's pray together.

Father in Heaven, I'm thankful for the opportunity to speak this morning. I'm thankful that the Gospel – the good news of Jesus – has something to say to so many of us here today who have somehow accepted the role of "superman" or "superwoman." We've said "yes" to that role but deep down we know that we are *not* superman or superwoman. And just like the woman in the drama, we're trapped. We're emotionally drained.

But you want more than that for us. You've called us to life that's truly life; life that's abundant and free. So, Lord, teach us today how to take hold of that life. Show us how to live in a way that takes care of our hearts. Grant us a life that is emotionally sustainable.

We ask it in the name of Jesus, our Savior and our Leader. Amen.

Before I begin this message, I want to put on my pastor hat and piggy-back on a few things Ladell mentioned in the announcements.

- 1. Yesterday I had a great opportunity to just walk thru the Boo-Bash. And I've got to tell you I was just blown away with the quality of what we produced yesterday for our community. I saw so many of you volunteering and dressed up goofy, not to mention our band. It was a wonderful thing. I was so excited and so pleased that this is the kind of church were we can do something like this for people in our community who are not church people. So, I just want to tell you all you rock. This is an awesome church and I'm so glad to be part of it.
- 2. Ladell mentioned the Potluck and Baptism that is coming up three weeks from this Wednesday night. I want to encourage you, especially if you are a person who has been coming to church recently and you've been understanding a little bit more of the gospel, of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, and you've come to the point in your life where you've said "I want Jesus to be my savior. I believe that he died from me and gave his life for me. He is here to forgive my sins and make me into a new person." If you've come to that point in your life, the Bible tells us that the next step is to be baptized. And, a lot of times we come from traditions where babies or little kids are baptized, but really in the Bible, it was grown-ups who were baptized. And, some of you are grown-ups and I want to encourage you, if you've come to that point in your life, don't be bashful, don't be bound by tradition, follow Jesus in baptism. And, there is information, as Ladell said, on how to do that. But I also want to encourage the rest of you who are the church called North Heartland to come to the next potluck and baptism as we gather together for dinner and to celebrate what God is doing here - and on that particular night we're going to baptize people and we're going to bless parents and children, and if you're a part of this church that's your way to come and encourage those folks in that commitment and in that decision. So, I want to strongly encourage you to mark that on your calendar, November 17, we're all going to get together and celebrate that as a family.

With all that said, let's get into today's message. As Ladell said, we're talking in this series about how to develop

an "emotionally sustainable life" and I suppose it would be a good idea to define exactly what I mean when I talk about "emotional sustainability." We've been throwing that term around for a couple of weeks, so let's be clear about what we're staying:

#### "Emotional sustainability" is living in such a way that we have the capacity to handle the neverending stresses and strains, demands and disappointments of life without imploding or exploding.

It's living in such a way that we have what it takes to handle life's stresses and strains, demands and disappointments without becoming anxious, negative, demanding, self-condemning, defensive, discouraged, depressed, angry, bitter, profane, fake, disengaged or any other way you can think of to describe emotional implosion or explosion.

Emotional sustainability is living in such a way that we have the capacity to take whatever comes without going into the tank for long periods of time. If you're living in the tank; if you're always imploding or exploding, I guarantee you're living a life that's unsustainable emotionally. I can say that because I've been there.

Now, so far in this series, we've talked about two critical components of developing an emotionally sustainable life.

- The first is knowing who you are; understanding how God has "wired you up" personality-wise and then trying to align and arrange your life accordingly.
- The second is living as human beings instead of "human doings"; working hard to rest and then living life out of that rest.

You absolutely cannot live an emotionally sustainable life without those two components. Oh, you can do it for a while. Sometimes you *need* to do it for a while because the situation demands it. But, eventually, if you *keep* doing it, it will catch up to you and you will tank emotionally. (And, if you weren't here either of the past two weekends when we talked about those things, you can learn more about those two components by listening to the message online at our website, or picking up a CD or DVD at our bookstore on the way out).

Today, we're going to look at the third component and I think it's the hardest one of all. At least, it is for me.

Here it is:

# If you want to develop an emotionally sustainable life, you must accept the fact that you have limits and then choose to live within them.

Let me say that again. If you want to develop an emotionally sustainable life, you must accept the fact that you have limits and then choose to live within them.

You and I, friends, are "limited editions" and to live otherwise is to invite emotional and, eventually, physical breakdown.

I've told this story before but it's such a vivid illustration that I'm going to tell it again. One night many years ago, my wife, Jetta, had trouble sleeping. She slept for only a few hours. It wasn't a huge deal that particular night because that afternoon, she caught up a little bit with a nap and fully expected that she would sleep great

that next night. But she didn't. Same thing happened – two or three hours of sleep.

This pattern went on for several weeks until one morning I awoke to see her sitting on the side of the bed holding her stomach and rocking back and forth. I said, "Honey, what's wrong?" This time she said she hadn't slept at all.

So, I said, "That's it. We're going to the doctor." We'd already fasted and prayed. She had been to a Christian counselor. But nothing was changing.

And the reason nothing was changing was that Jetta had developed a clinical anxiety disorder – a physical manifestation of emotional implosion – brought on by many years of repeatedly violating her limits; saying "yes" to more than she could handle. Oh, *she was able to do it for a while* – a long while, actually, *36 years* … and looked good doing it. But it finally caught up to her and she had to do all the things that people with anxiety disorders have to do. And, she still does, by the way.

Now, the result of living beyond your limits may look different in your life than it does in Jetta's life and even in mine. I tend to explode whereas she tends to implode. And you may do either one ... or both ... or some combination. But the point is that consistently living beyond your limits is emotionally and sometimes physically unsustainable. So you – and I – have to discover our limits and then live within them.

# Why Limits Are Hard

But again, it's so hard to do. And I think there are several factors that make it difficult.

See if you can relate to any of these.

# 1. First of all, most of us believe that "more is better."

Most of us believe that more is better. And since we believe this, we live overextended lives in almost every way.

- As a nation and individuals we're overextended financially so we can have more stuff (because more stuff is better)
- We're overextended in our careers because we want more money or more prestige, because more money and more prestige is better.
- We're overextended physically we're tired, out of shape, malnourished because we want to eat more; we want to cram more activities and commitments into an already crammed and overcommitted schedule.

The scary thing about that one, is that I see it happening in our children. I see parents running their children all over town every single day of the week so they can participate in three or four activities besides school and church (if they can somehow squeeze that in). The schedule some of these kids are keeping is nuts. And why? Because parents believe that more activities, more exposure to the world will make their kids better; get them into a better college; give them a better chance at success (however we define success in this culture).

But kids are running ragged (to say nothing of the parents). Oh, they can do it for a while, maybe even longer

than their parents because they're young. But eventually it's going to catch up to them. They're going to implode or explode. We're seeing more of that in our culture.

Most of us believe that "more is better." And that makes it difficult to respect our limitations.

Another reason it's difficult for many of us to live within our limits is that ...

# 2. We want people to like us or think highly of us.

We think (consciously or subconsciously) "I want my kids to like me. I want my parents to be pleased with me. I want my boss and coworkers to think I'm competent. I want my neighbors to think I'm a good citizen. *So I will do whatever it takes to make all of them happy all of the time.*"

After Jetta went to the doctor, he referred her to a psychiatrist who put her on an anti-depressant. But he also told both of us to attend a seminar on living with anxiety disorder which was actually held in the dining hall of this building. (That was before NHCC was here, back when this place was a psychiatric hospital). At that seminar, the speaker said, "Most of you here tonight are taking some kind of medication, and that will alleviate your symptoms. But you need to figure out how you got in this mess in the first place and deal with it."

As Jetta began to do that with the help of a Christian counselor, she realized that her whole life she had been striving to please everyone: her parents, her relatives, her friends, me, our kids, even God. She had created in her mind an impossible standard of "good daughter", "good sister", "good friend", "good wife", "good mother", "good Christian" and she was going to live up to it no matter what. But like so many people who are compelled to please others, eventually, she could not.

But there's a third factor that makes it even more difficult to live within our limits, especially for those of us who are serious about following Christ.

# 3. We believe it is our "Christian duty" to serve everyone at all times.

And we believe that because we've heard lots of great sermons about serving one another, serving Jesus, serving people who don't know Christ, even serving our enemies. And the Bible is full of exhortations to do just that.

For instance, Jesus said things like ...

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Matthew 16:24 (NIV) "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Mark 8:35 (NIV)

"It is better to give than to receive." Acts 20:35 (NIV)

The Apostle Paul encouraged the same kind of self-sacrifice when he wrote of some very poor Christians in the first century who were in great distress.

#### He wrote that they ...

... overflowed in rich generosity ... they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. <u>And they did it of their own free will</u>. 2 Corinthians 8:2-3 (NLT)

What good Christian wouldn't want to be like them?

Then, of course, there's the verse that clinches it for many of us, even when we know we are way past our limits.

#### Paul wrote:

I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. Philippians 4:13 (NLT)

"No matter how hard it is, no matter how tired I am, no matter how burned out I feel," we tell ourselves ...

- "Regardless of whether I'm living in line with my God-given personality and gifts;
- Regardless of the season of life I'm in;
- Regardless of my health or age or physical condition;
- Regardless of my emotional, physical and intellectual capacity;
- Regardless of the scars and wounds I've suffered which still need to be healed ...<sup>i</sup>

... I should be able to keep going because of Jesus. And if I can't, then there must be something wrong with me. I must not be a good Christian."

By the way, this is why a lot of pastors and staff members and high-capacity volunteers in churches flame out. They see "serving everyone at all times" as their Christian duty and eventually they can't do it anymore. But they feel guilty about it ... and then they get bitter about it ... and they burn out and they quit ...

... which is what Peter Scazzero's wife did.

# Peter Scazzero is the guy who wrote the book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (which we have at our bookstore and in our library).

And throughout this series, as you know, I've been quoting from his book.

# But just recently, his wife, Geri has *also* written a book which is actually called *I Quit!* in which she talks about her own experience which led her to quit trying to prove she was a good Christian.

Listen to what she writes. It's heartbreakingly insightful.

After seventeen years of being a committed Christian, I came to realize that excessive self-denial had led me to a joyless, guilt-ridden existence. Jesus invited me into the Christian life to enjoy a rich banquet at his table. Instead, it often felt like I was a galley slave, laboring to serve everyone else at the feast rather than enjoying it myself. In my relationship with Jesus, I'd gone from the <u>great joy</u> of feeling overwhelmed by his <u>love</u> to <u>bitter</u> <u>resentment</u> at feeling overwhelmed by his <u>demands</u>.

My identity had been swallowed up in putting others before myself.

- I constantly thought of the needs of our four small daughters.
- I worried about Pete's responsibilities [as a pastor].
- I filled in wherever needed to help our growing church.

# She concludes:

These are all potentially good things, but my love had become a 'have to,' a 'should' rather than a gift freely given. I mistakenly believed I didn't have a choice."<sup>ii</sup>

Now, obviously Geri had developed a warped view of what it means to follow Christ and we'll get to that in a minute, but I want us to reflect on that last statement. When you start feeling like your whole life is a list of have-tos and oughts and shoulds; when you don't feel like you have a choice, that's a sign that you are living beyond your limits.

Actually, the Scazzeros, together, came up with a list of 10 signs that your life is overextended. <sup>iii</sup> I'm going to show you just a few of them today, but I'll post all 10 of them on *The City* later this afternoon, so <u>if you have</u> signed up for *The City* (I'm going to get this in every message for the next month and a half) you can check it out, along with some other good stuff about this subject that I'll be posting all week long. So, get on The City!

# You're probably living beyond your limits if ...

- 1. You believe you don't have choices and you feel like you are trapped.
- 2. You often do for others what they can and should do for themselves.
- 3. You rarely consider your own hopes and dreams because of your focus on others.

# You're probably living beyond your limits if ...

- 4. You consistently say "yes' when you would rather say "no".
- 5. You're becoming less loving instead of more loving.
- 6. You are resentful and tired because you regularly "try to do it all."

Any of those apply to you? If they do, put all of *that* together with the belief that "more is better" and the desire to make people like you and think highly of you ... and you can see why it is so hard for most of us to accept our limits and then choose to live within them.

# The Gospel and Our Limits

So, what's the answer? How do we overcome all of these factors and move towards emotional sustainability in our lives?

As always, the answer is found in the Gospel – in the good news that, even though we're far worse off because

of our sin than we can ever imagine, we are far more loved and accepted because of Christ than we can ever dream.

And because of this, Jesus told us to repent – to change the way we think about things - and to start believing the truth instead.

"The kingdom of God is near," he said. "Repent and believe this good news." Mark 1:15 (NIV)

So, I want to talk to you about two ways in which our thinking about our limits needs to change if we're going to live an emotionally sustainable life.

Here's the first change:

# 1. We must start believing that saying "no" is not (always) selfish.

We've got to start believing that saying "no" is not always selfish. If you're going to say "no" to things you just can't do, you have to be confident that *it's OK with God* for you to do so; confident that *God actually desires* for you to live an emotionally sustainable life.

"But, wait Rick, how does that stack up with all those verses from the Bible you just read? What about Jesus saying 'if you want to be my follower you have to deny yourself and take up your cross.'?" That doesn't sound like "no" is an acceptable answer to anything.

Well, here's the deal. Before you can deny yourself ... you need to actually *have* a self to deny. Before you can give yourself away you have to *have* a self to give away. And if you never respect the limits of your self, eventually you will no longer have a self.

"Well, what about Paul saying we can do everything through Christ, who gives us strength?"

Well, here's the deal. When you read the context of that passage (which is always a good idea whenever you read the Bible), Paul was talking specifically about the ability to be content in whatever financial situation he found himself – having lots or having little. He wasn't making a blanket statement that we should use to justify running ourselves ragged.

"Yeah, but what about those dirt poor Christians who gave far beyond themselves of their own free will? They didn't say 'no' to the need. They just pushed through and did what was necessary."

Well, let me read you what Paul wrote just before he wrote about their sacrificial giving.

# He said ...

They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also <u>filled</u> <u>with abundant joy</u>, which has overflowed in rich generosity.

What's Paul saying? They gave, but not out of duty. They gave out of fullness. In spite of the fact that they had very little monetarily (which would tank most of us) they were *full of joy and not empty* on the inside. And how

do you think they got that way? By making it a priority to take care of their hearts; by living emotionally sustainable lives.

#### Peter Scazzero writes:

Out of a "cup that runs over," we offer the life of Jesus to those whom we serve. What else do we have to give?<sup>iv</sup>

Answer: nothing. You cannot give what you do not have. Loved people love. Forgiven people forgive. People who have built emotionally sustainable lives by saying no when they need to, have great capacity to say "yes" when it's necessary.

#### That's why, as another writer puts it:

"Self-care is never a selfish act-it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others [me] ... We do so [self-care] not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch."

And if you and I are going to live within our limits, we have to start believing that. And we have to practically integrate that belief into our lives.

Well, how do you do that? I think you start by making some decisions about what you will stop doing and what you'll start doing. And you have to communicate those decisions to the people around you. And not in a demanding or defensive way. You just say, "I'm over-extended and I need to make some changes in my life."

Now, those conversations may not go very well. You might tell your boss, "Hey, I'm not working 50 hours a week anymore," and you might get demoted, you might lose your job, but that's the price you have to be willing to pay. You might tell your kids, "I can't be a 24/7 taxi service anymore" and they may not like it. *But they might*.

When Jetta figured out that saying "yes" for so many years had produced her anxiety disorder, she had to make some changes, which meant that *we all did*. Kids had to start doing their own laundry. I had to make some changes in my life. I had to pick up the slack. I started doing the grocery shopping. I started taking care of the finances. I had to change my expectations of what it meant to be married. I had to give her permission to say "no" even to me. But I got my wife back, so it was worth it.

You've got to start believing that saying "no" is OK if you want to live an emotionally sustainable life.

Now, having said that I think I do need to add that ...

# Freedom to say "no" is not an excuse for apathy or self-centeredness.

It's not a license to bail on responsibility. It's permission to draw boundaries that better define what those responsibilities are. It's permission to get into a place where you are actually *better able to serve God and others*.

And I think I need to say that because whenever I give a message like this, sometimes people take it as permission to drop out of attending or volunteering at church. "Oh, I'm so glad he gave that message because trying to fit every Saturday night or Sunday morning into every week of the schedule is so draining." Or, "I'm so glad he gave that message because volunteering at church just takes so much out of me."

Let me be clear. That's *not* what I'm saying here. For those of us who are believers in Jesus, we're called to *be* the church, so how can we drop out of it???

If we're really honest with ourselves, truth is that it's not going to church every week or doing volunteer ministry in the church that's wearing us out. It's that we're so overextended in other areas of life that *we don't have anything left* when it comes time to take our place in the body of Christ.

We've seen this over and over through the years when people flame out around here. When they tell us everything else that they're staying "yes" to in their lives – "I have Chief's tickets, my kids are in five activities, I have a lake house, we have a boat, I have a golf membership, a business on the side, have to go visit family" ... it's no wonder they have to say "no" to worshipping and serving God. There's just nothing left.

That's not to say that sometimes we don't need a break. Vacations are cool. Gold is cool. Boats are cool. Sabbaticals from serving in the church are cool. I do that. Our staff does that. But if the chronic condition of our lives is that we don't have anything left in the tank because we're so overextended everywhere else, especially in *entertainment*, I think that's a problem.

And I think God would say to us, "Friends, freedom to say no is not an excuse for apathy or self-centeredness. It's permission to develop emotional sustainability so that we have something to give."

I hope that's clear.

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Now, I said there were *two ways* in which our thinking needs to change if we're going to develop an emotionally sustainable life. There's another belief that needs to be challenged, and to understand it, let's go back to the three factors that make it so hard to accept and live within our limits and ask the "why" question:

- *Why* do we believe more is better?
- *Why* do we so desperately want to be liked?
- *Why* do we feel driven to do our "Christian duty?"

Have you ever wondered about these things? Have you ever wondered why we strive so hard for these things even though doing so leads us into the tank many times?

Well to answer that question (or questions), let's take a look at one of our favorite passages, Genesis Chapter 3. I've probably taught more messages out of this one passage because this one passage just describes the human condition so well. At this point in the story, Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden and God has already said to Adam, "Look at all of this stuff I have made for you here. You can freely enjoy everything except for the fruit of this one tree. It's off-limits to you, Adam, but for good reason, because if you eat the fruit from this tree, death will enter the world and everything in the world will be cursed including you."

Chapter three says Satan comes to Adam's wife, Eve, and says:

"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from <u>any tree in the garden</u>'?"

Which, obviously, is *not* what God said. But Satan is baiting Eve, planting doubts in her mind.

#### But she handles it pretty well.

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is <u>in the middle of the garden</u>, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' "

Of course, God didn't say anything to Adam about not touching it. I'm not sure where Eve got that.

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

In other words, Satan is saying, "Eve, I don't know why God did this to you guys. You and Adam seem like nice kids. You seem mature and responsible enough. There's just no reason for Him to place this artificial limitation on you. Nothing bad is going to happen. Eve, here's what's really going on: God knows that if you eat that particular fruit, you will be like Him. You will be *unlimited* as *He* is unlimited. You'll be like 'little gods' and he just can't stand the thought of that."

And Eve thought about that for a while. And then, the Bible says ...

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Genesis 3:1-6 (NIV)

And they did so – they went beyond their limits (to their death, in fact) – because they thought God was holding out on them. See, they didn't really believe that God loved and cared for them so they thought "we've got to be god-like ourselves."

Of course, we know that it didn't turn out like they expected. *But we do the same thing they did*. We don't believe that God truly loves us and cares for us just as we are "so," we tell ourselves, "we had better do ...

- whatever it takes to get more of everything;
- whatever it takes to make people love us;
- whatever it takes to earn spiritual brownie points so that God will be obligate to care for us ...

... even if it kills us to do so (figuratively or literally)."

See, we don't trust God so we decide we just have to do it all ourselves. We have to become "little gods." And, in doing so, we usurp the role that only He should have.

See, this is the insidious thing about this pressure to live beyond our limits. It feels like it's all external. It feels

like we're just the poor victims. But it's not and we're not. We *choose* to live beyond our limits – we *choose* to run ourselves and even our kids ragged – because we don't trust that God is going to take care of us and so we just need to do it all ourselves.

And this is why, if we're ever going to move towards an emotionally sustainable life ...

# 2. We must believe in God's absolute goodness towards us, personally.

We have got to believe in God's absolute goodness towards us, personally. We have to repent of believing anything else.

- We have to stop believing that if our kids aren't in a half-dozen activities by the third grade, they just won't have every advantage in life.
- We have to stop believing that if we actually follow God's design for a 24-hour period where we do nothing but rest and enjoy Him and our family, that we'll fall behind the competition and our world will come crashing down on us.
- We've got to stop believing and living as if it's all up to us because it's not.

For me personally, this is one of the biggest decisions I have had to make in my life coming out of the pastors' retreat last summer. When I came out of that retreat I decided that I'm going to work as hard as I can, in the time I'm supposed to work, but I am not my job. I am not "tied to the mast of the ship called NHCC. You've heard me say that several times. The experience of "church" is something we all – you and me and the Holy Spirit – create together. It's not all up to me.

And I can live that way and you can live that way – within your limits – because God is absolutely good and absolutely for us. That's what Jesus was getting at when he once said:

"Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

For the pagans [people who do not know the God of the Universe or have a personal relationship with him] run after all these things ...

I love the imagery of that phrase ... people with so many worries running themselves ragged because it's all up to them. "But you don't have to live like that," Jesus is saying, "because ...

Your heavenly Father [who loves you and cares for you far more than you can ever dream] knows that you need these things.

# So, instead of trying to make it happen all by yourself ...

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matthew 6:31-33 (NIV)

"Put God in the place where God belongs and put yourself in the place where you belong and it will work out." Trust that. Believe that, Jesus is saying.

# Conclusion

Now, I'm going to ask the band to come and get in place. They are going to do a closing song that I think will help us reflect on this a little bit.

As I was preparing for this particular message, one passage of scripture kept coming to my mind. It's from the Gospel of Matthew. He writes ...

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:35-36 (NIV)

That phrase just struck me – "they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd" – because it made me think of so many of us. A lot of times, I will stand in the back of the auditorium during the first part of a service and watch all the people standing and singing (or not singing) and that phrase goes through my mind: "harassed and helpless, harassed and helpless." Running for all these things; going way beyond their limits. And I pray, Jesus be the shepherd of these people because so many of them – so many of us – are saying yes to so many things in life that are destroying us from the inside out. So many of us are living without limits.

So, today, as our band closes us out, I want you to think about these things. I want you to embrace the truth that saying "no" isn't always selfish. And I want you to embrace the truth that Jesus loves you so much that he died to save the world ... and you do not have to.

Let's pray.

Endnotes

<sup>ii</sup> Geri Scazzero, I Quit!, pg 20

<sup>iii</sup> See http://www.petescazzero.com/emotional-health/10-ways-to-know-it-is-time-to-quit/ <sup>iv</sup> http://www.petescazzero.com/discipleshipformation/the-gift-of-limits-and-leadership/

<sup>v</sup> Parker Palmer

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> This list is from: http://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/about/pdfs/Pastors\_and\_the\_GIft\_of\_Limits\_Toby.pdf